E.M. Gardner

Stettler, Alberta.

STEER DRIVING

GROUARD TO KLESKIM RANCH.

I will try to tell you about driving 428 head of two-year old steers from Grouard to Kleskim Ranch just east of Sexsmith. At that time I was manager of Kleskim Ranch and we had wintered these cattle at the west end of Lesser Slave Lake, just where the Hart River goes into it. After having talked to some of the old-timers around Grande Prairie who had driven a small bunch of beef cattle over this trail supplying beef for the railway when it was built into the Peace River and they told me it quite feasible to get through and thereby save the cost of shipping back, after consulting the Directors in Edmonton, it was decided to drive through. We intended to send a couple men from the ranch with the saddle horses and go over the trail to Grouard and they would know if it was possible to make the trip. Well, the men left the ranch with the saddle horses, arrived at the crossing of the Smokey River and found the ice was going out and this meant quite a delay before the ferry was running so we shipped the saddle horses to the nearest ppint by rail to where the cattle were.

We started the cattle out going via High Prairie and from there to the crossing of the Little Smokey. This would be about the end of April, 1923. There was good feed along the river banks and they held the cattle there for several days giving them good rest and fill-up this time--everything very well and everything looked as if was going to be a very successful trip.

I had returned to the ranch from High Prairie expecting that in about ten days or two weeks they would have reached the Big Smokey where we were to have extra men and help cross, this being only eighteen miles from the ranch and there was a telephone there.

Well, time went on and we expected word of them at the Big Smokey crossing. Very nearly a month passed and no word. I was worried but thought they had found good grazing and were making the trip as easy as possible on the cattle.

Then one evening word came that they wanted me at once and some more horses as they had lost most of the cattle in the bush east of Sturgeon Lake. I arranged to have two men leave with extra horses and grub and oats. They were to start next morning with a wagon and go to Sturgeon Lake and wait there. We knew that you could get over the old Edison Trail by wagon to Sturgeon Lake. I left that evening with a couple of saddle horses to ride to Sturgeon Lake about sixty-five miles away meeting Clarke, the man that had brought the word out at Goodwin's Crossing. We rode all night except for an hour or so when we rested the horses.

Clarke told me what had happened. After they had crossed the cattle at the Little Smokey River, they were to follow an old trail from there to Sturgeon Lake. In lots of places they had to chop the deadfall of the trail. One day they only got about a mile, they had struck a place where there had been a windfall of trees and they also found there had been a big strip burnt out last fall by a forest

fire which meant that any little open places where there was feed had been burnt off. They also were up against it for enough feed for the cattle. These little meadows and sloughs that were not burnt were very small, all right for twenty-five to thirty head but for over four hundred, hardly room to feed. This whole country was heavy forest or swamp and scrub. Well, they were over a week getting through to a little lake called Peswarky (?) about twelve miles east of Sturgeon Lake and a little north. There was a lot of feed there round the edges, being really a kind of hay slough. They decided to rest here for about a week and give the cattle a chance to pick up.

Anyway, they discovered a still near the lake with a brew ready to use. What with so much whiskey causing bad blood among the crew, the cattle disappeared and so did some of the crew.

Arriving at Sturgeon Lake by breakfast time, went to Mr. Kerr's who was running a trading post there and got some grub. He asked us to have breakfast with him, also gave us a drink which helped a lot. Mr. Kerr had been a Hudson Bay factor for years in the north and had quit and gone into business for himself.

I asked him when we were eating breakfast if he were me how he would go about getting these cattle. As far as I could find out from Clarke nearly all the cattle were gone in that miles of bush swamp country covering fifty or sixty miles each way. Kerr said there is only one way, get a bunch of Indians and let them track them for you. I

asked him if he could get the Indians. He said he would send them as soon as he could.

We made the camp that afternoon. They had got about sixty head of cattle left and the rest were gone, God knew where, into that forest--muskeg that covered hundreds of square miles north to the Peace River and west to Big Smokey and east and south to Little Smokey.

After looking things over I decided to take a man and back-track to where they had crossed the Little Smokey, hoping to pick up some cattle that had tried to return, leaving the rest to hold the cattle we had and help the Indians when they arrived next morning.

We found tracks going back. We caught up to them just as they were coming down the hill to the Little Smokey. There were, I think, 6 head in this bunch. We figured that there were more but must have missed them coming down. However, we started back with these cattle and explored every place they could get off the trail and by the next night we had 32 cattle arriving back to camp after three days in the bush, having just taken enough grub for one day we were kind of gaunt. When we came within a couple of miles of where we had told them to hold the cattle after the arrival of the Indians, we stopped at the fire ranger's shack and all he had was some home brew, cheese and dough God's, I think that was one of the most wonderful meals I ever had for he told us that the Indians had got most of the cattle and we hoped that our thirty-two would make up the count which it did except one that had bogged down on the lake and died. It is a wonderful feeling to be told

that everything was being straightened out after being nearly crazy with worry and then half starved. I don't think I'll ever forget that meal and home brew served to help.

We went in to Sturgeon Lake to get supplies and there heard that the Indians were not going to allow us to take the cattle across their reserve. There was absolutely no way round. The trail ran along the lake shore on one side, the heavy forest full of deadfall on the other. It meant that unless they let us go through we had to go back over what we had been weeks getting over and then ship from High Prairie. This we would not do. Again I consulted Mr. Kerr as there was no Indian agent there or anyone that had any authority. He advised going to the Roman Catholic Mission and see the Fathers. I did this and found out from the Father that the Indians were afraid that if we took the cattle through their village we might damage or overrun their grave yard which was at a bend of the road, also they had a hay meadow about four miles west of the village and figured that we would camp on that. I promised that we would not and guaranteed that no damage would be done to their grave yard and offered to pay for any damage and also for the privilege of going through. I explained that it was impossible to go back. He was very good about it, said he would take it up with the Indians. I asked him to have the Indians tie their dogs up or put them in their shacks and if the Indians would stay in their shacks until we passed. The village was scattered along the lake for

about a mile and a half. We had the cattle well strung out when we reached the village at about 5 o'clock Sunday afternoon (the time agreed upon). A couple breeds and myself rode with the led bunch and when we passed the grave yard I stayed there to keep cattle following the led bunch r from getting in or over their graveyard.

Everything went just fine and we passed through their hay meadow and camped in the trail in the forest. The timber and deadfall was so thick on both sides that it meant only watching both ends that night. Next day we struck some more open country near the east end of Sturgeon Lake. After getting through the village I went back and thanked the Fathers and Mr. Kerr for their kindness and they both gave me a drink. The Fathers gave me some wonder wine. I decided that I would return to the ranch and see how things were going. They had lots of help with the cattle and the country from Sturgeon Lake to the Big Smokey was more open and in lots of places quite open.

On getting back to the ranch I found that Mr. Mike Sheady who was one of the Directors had arrived from Edmonton, some of our good friends having written our Directors that the cattle were lost and had died from poison weed. I never forget the way he looked at me when I told him that we had all the cattle but seven, six of these were in a fire warden's pasture, being too lame to travel and one dead. I knew that he did not believe me. Afterwards finding out that several people had convinced him that it was impossible to get through on that trail, I decided to take a car and go as far as possible to meet the cattle

taking Mr. Sheady with me. I knew that I could get as far as Debolt and perhaps further, this being the old Edison Trail from Sturgeon Lake to Grande Prairie there was a lot of Cordoroy road on it.

Anyway we left and met the cattle and camped there that night. Mr. Sheady was very pleased to see the cattle the next morning. The next morning before we started one of the men came in and said that some of the cattle were dying. I took his horse and rode out to the herd. Sure enough! There were several head down with bloat or poison weed. I immediately stabbed them and started the herd moving. They seemed to go down like rotten sheep. In the first hour's drive we had about forty down but stabbing them and cutting their ears and tail off, brought relief. We moved about five miles on to some high ground and went back to look after the ones we had stabbed. We got them all, except one was dead. Some of them were pretty sick but pulled through.

I decided to stay with the cattle till after we crossed the Smokey River. On arriving there about the middle of June we made two attempts to swim the cattle but they milled on us in mid-stream and came out on the same side. There were very bad banks just below where they landed and was afraid that the third time they might get swept down stream further, and might be a further loss. So we decided to use the ferry. We built a corral and shute on to the ferry and crossed them twenty at a time. I don't think we ever made the trip across that some did not jump overboard and into the river and swim across. Most of them landed on

on the right side, the others had to be reloaded and taken across.

After crossing the Big Smokey we were within eighteen miles of the Kelskim Ranch and our troubles were over. The trip took very nearly two months and cost about as much (including the two that died and the expense of getting the six head left at the fire ranger's pasture) as if we had shipped from High Prairie in the first place.